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A Transformative Dance through “Language Mountains” and “Blind Spots”: Park Educators Learn Responsiveness to Immigrant Newcomers

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Abstract: This paper describes a project *Learning Language, Learning the Land*, created to enhance park accessibility and social belonging for immigrant newcomers by combining language learning and environmental literacy in a city park and provincial park setting. This paper reports on the dialectics of transformative learning for parks staff as they discovered the inappropriateness of didactic methods and how effective adult learning emerges from rapport, educational responsiveness and ethnocultural knowledge. Second, through informal learning, staff became allies in these traditionally white, middle class spaces, helping build a sense of place and social belonging.

Introduction and Purpose of Study

This empirical research paper describes the study *Learning Language, Learning the Land*, that examined a pilot educational project combining language learning and environmental literacy for immigrant newcomers in both a city park and provincial park setting. The primary goals of the education project were to remove barriers to park access, generate best practices for parks educators, ensure safe park engagement, foster park stewardship, and nurture connectedness to and appreciation of the ecosystem diversity in this region of Canada.

Initiated by an immigrant service agency in partnership with provincial and city parks staff, the research evaluated achievement of the project goals as well as researched: a. the meaning-making of newcomers as they negotiated understandings of parks in both their country/culture of origin and Canadian parks, and b. the connection between building a sense of place in parks with building a sense of belonging in society. This paper will focus on select findings: the dialectical transformative learning process between parks staff, literacy teachers, and newcomers as they negotiated diverse expectations and culturally constructed preferences for recreation, as well as the transformative learning among parks staff as they confronted the limits of traditional didactic approaches and, through informal learning, became allies of newcomers by acting as conduits for building a sense of place and social belonging. These findings have implications for all organizations seeking to engage immigrant newcomers, for nonformal educators working in cultural institutions, and for environmental educators engaging diverse ethnocultural groups.

Key Problematics and Related Literature

Research on immigration reveals not only substantial negative impacts on the economic wellbeing of newcomer families, notably poverty, but also on the social and cultural wellbeing of families - as generational roles are often reversed, gender and family roles shift and perhaps conflict, and identities are re-formed. Encountering different values, beliefs and daily norms in the adopted country can prompt a spectrum of responses among newcomers – from rejection and resistance to selective integration or assimilation - adding significant tension and stress into family life (Waters & Teo, 2003). Loneliness and a sense of isolation arise from an absence of familiar kinship and social networks, exacerbated by unfamiliarity with the language (Creese, Dyck & McLaren, 1999). Further stress is added when the adopted country is experienced as unwelcoming – through racialization and discriminatory, exclusionary practices (Tan, 2004).

Dodge (1990) suggests that building a sense of belonging in a new society is an important first step for newcomers, particularly ensuring newcomers have equal access to all societal resources (Spoonley, et al, 2005). Barriers of access to natural areas such as local and national parks is considered one form of exclusion (Den Hoed, 2008), yet access to such natural spaces meets a basic human need. Such connections with land can situate one's identity within the context of a new natural as well as social space (Clayton & Opotow, 2003).

Many Canadian park administrations note the social trends of an aging population, increased urbanization, changing tourist desires, and demographic diversity prompt the necessity for new kinds of responsiveness (Bain, Quinn, & Rettie, 2007). Den Hoed (2008) identifies that the historical targets of parks programming have been affluent white Canadians, but high usage levels are waning and the need to engage immigrant newcomers to build public support is clear. North American research has addressed the shift in park visitorship and ethnocultural needs, but it has focused on culturally-constructed preferences for recreation rather than the role of programming in social integration or staff learning processes for adapting to diverse audiences.

Research on informal learning sites, such as cultural institutions like museums or natural settings like parks, has shown the importance of public sites as "commons" or "third places," where diverse community members converge to dialogue and learn (Taylor, 2010). Yet, these can and should be locations of contestation over dominant narratives, asymmetrical power relations, and inclusion of a multiplicity of voices (Taylor, 2010). As Anne Bishop (2002) describes, allies are those who build solidarity with each other by becoming conscious of privilege and oppression through mutual story-telling, social analysis and collective action.

Environmental education can be a dialogue about the interconnectedness of the social, economic, and ecological systems, but too often has been approached as awareness-building or goal-directedness toward a pre-established outcome. Hart (1990) suggests that environmental education is best facilitated through mutual learning, deliberative citizen inquiry, and active participation (Huckle & Sterling, 1996). Yet, Agyeman (1995) argues, newcomer groups are constructed by dominant groups as lacking in ecological knowledge and environmental concern.

Marouli (2002) asserts that low income and visible minorities are not well represented in the environmental movement despite experiencing the brunt of environmental consequences. Multicultural Environmental Education has increased access of culturally diverse to environmental education and their worldviews within it. To date, there is little research literature that links environmental education and English language acquisition, particularly English as a Second Language (ESL). However, one study (Drill, et al, 2009) found high levels of interest in adult ESL classrooms for environmental literacy.

Theoretical Framework, Project Design and Research Methodology

The theoretical framework informing this study is critical hermeneutics where a social psychological microanalysis of individual actors is bridged to a macrostructural analysis (Morrow, 1994). Critical understandings of transformative learning were employed where individuals become conscious of themselves as situated within larger political and economic relations and as an actor within these relations (Cunningham, 1992; Freire 1990/1973). A dialectical understanding of transformation focuses on personal and social contradictions that generate energy for change.

While the study was informed by the participatory action research, educational action research was the chosen methodology, allowing for the study of how learning develop in the midst of action (McTaggart, 1997; Carson & Sumara, 1997). Researchers play multiple roles as educator, action participant, and researcher-witnessing-change. This study blended the two traditions by gathering the partners to discuss issues and take action, in this case educational programming. However, the researchers had primary responsibility for recording the process and creating reflective spaces (Kuhne & Quigley, 1997).

The *Learning Language, Learning the Land* project included: 1. classroom activities to build literacy related to the environment and camping; 2. *A Day in the Park* where participants visited a city park and participated in guided interpretive walks, tent set- up exercises, fire building activities, park rules and safety presentation, and a "typical" campfire lunch; and 3. a two night/three day *Weekend Camping* experience at a provincial park outside the city where learners set up tents and participated in guided interpretive walks, bird banding, introduction to conservation officers/park rangers, and wildlife biologist presentations. The educational process was piloted with three cohort groups; cohorts 1 and 3 were ESL students of mixed genders, ages, diverse countries of origin, and literacy levels accompanied by their families, whereas cohort 2 were families from a homogenous enthnocultural Burmese Karen community. Two of the five research questions are addressed in this paper: *Can literacy activities in outdoor settings enhance the sense of competence and belonging of newcomers? What learning did the Parks staff experience as they designed and implemented this project?*

Data collection utilized mixed methods (Wellington, 2000). Over 100 pre- and post-survey learner workbooks were administered by the ESL teachers and used to measure gains in literacy, environmental knowledge, and outdoor skills. Qualitative data was collected from field notes, audio-taped semi-structured interviews with four provincial and city parks staff during and after the pilot, 37 audio-taped pre- and post-camping semi-structured interviews with newcomers grouped by language proficiency, and 3 post-project interviews with the ESL teachers and agency workers. Interview data for these findings were transcribed, coded and categorized.

Findings

Overall, the camping project was immensely successful in terms of newcomer enjoyment and modest English language and environmental literacy gains. However, the most important gain was building friendships via informal learning that augmented social integration. This paper specifically focuses on the transformative learning of both provincial and city parks staff, as they navigated the 8 month planning process and adapted their strategies from one cohort to the next.

Park Staff Assumptions. The parks staff held several key assumptions that dominated project design. The first assumption was considering immigrant newcomer groups as "just another audience" and doing their "stock presentations" on the fly with no adaptation or additional preparation. The starting point for the programming remained the presenters'

knowledge, their standard presentation formats, and their organizational messaging - from park rules to protection and conservation – a didactic approach used with white, middle class groups. No advance consideration was given to language and literacy levels, ethnocultural or religious background, urban or rural residency prior to immigration, types of immigration stories, previous nature experiences, or pre-existing environmental knowledge. It was clear that all the staff assumed the newcomers would be doing the learning. Further, they assumed that the immigrant newcomers had no connections to land or existing environmental commitments. Thus, they considered the main issues as lack of information about accessing Canadian parks and about Canadian ecosystems, and comfort and "proper" equipment in an outdoor setting.

Disorientation. Initially, during pre-program planning, parks staff said that they felt "challenged" to do their regular planning in the regular way. The logistics of providing camping equipment, booking group sites, and planning activities was immensely difficult amidst constant changing of plans, contact people, and numbers and ages of registrants. Unaware of the tremendous daily challenges that immigrant newcomers face, it was hard for them to understand why they could not get firm attendance commitments. They did not understand the complex relationships between groups associated with the immigrant serving agency, further confusing planning. They also faced opposition to journaling as a core activity, being told by a leader that this "will hurt the group" by triggering feelings of inadequacy. These kinds of difficulties created disorientation among parks staff, but they persisted with their regular planning.

Abandonment of Plans. Once on-site in a city park, faced with the first large cohort of newcomers, all the parks staff reported feeling "flustered" and "uncertain." They "feared lecturing" and had "reservations about inappropriate preparation." They were "lacking self confidence" as they realized the significant challenges of communicating cross-culturally with limited English speakers, sensing the information would be inaccessible. In this disorientation, rather than adapting their plans, the leaders "let it go" and abandoned their plans. The nature hikes occurred as planned but the detailed scientific language was lost on many participants. Newcomers spontaneously started their own activities - soccer games, examining the tents, or food preparation. Willing to try "typical Canadian" campfire food, they came prepared with traditional foods, sharing liberally. This was a significant turning point, as newcomers invited parks staff to join them in their food and conversation, acting as reverse hosts.

Observation and Responsiveness. The staff realized they were outside "my comfort zone" and observed the ESL teachers, who acted as cultural brokers, explaining the ethnocultural backgrounds of participants and inviting them to classroom or community events. With the second cohort, the parks staff adopted a more responsive "open-endedness" approach and began planning a "suite of options" for activities. The focus began to shift towards a relaxed, organic process of getting to know names, hearing environment stories from countries of origin, and listening to immigration and refugee stories. One staff person noted that "I learned a lot from the families." Parks staff began to acknowledge the "language mountains" in terms of the barriers present in cross-cultural and multi-lingual communication. They described their "blind spots" in terms of letting go of a heavily planned agenda and "suspend[ing]" their own expectations to "allow them to be themselves and allow [them] just to be able to be in the park."

Experiential Learning. With the second cohort, parks staff were *learning experientially* by listening to names, families, and immigration stories. The program still lacked important structure but one parks staff described learning to be flexible with plans. They were learning how to communicate appropriately from the ESL teachers, leaving behind the bureaucratic and scientific language that commonly infuses park discourse. Informally initiating frog and butterfly hunting or soccer games, not requiring language, began to build relationships with families.

Shifting Assumptions. Many assumptions of the parks staff began to shift, for instance, to more basic program goals. As well, ideas of leadership shifted "to almost a supportive role…allow[ing] them to feel they are in control." Originally, the primary leader understood himself as a didactic teacher giving out information in a formal session which evolved to understanding himself as the logistical supporter then shifting to collaborative planner. "There is a growing on both sides, parks learning about them and being aware…and them getting to know the limitations of [parks]." The model of learning was also shifting from the "paradigm of education" where "the leader tells." In a reflective moment, he admitted his performative anxieties but then suggested that programming still needed to change from a "more structured program" to be "more open about letting them grow ownership of it and if they have ownership of it, they will feel empowered and they will want to come back again…rather than them coming and getting off the bus and everything is done for them, like a traditional interpretive program." Finally, there was also a shift in who was doing the learning: "We are learning a lot about how the [immigrant serving] centre works." In sum, one staff person said, "I am a man under change right now daily…it is ongoing. My comfort zone is changing…not be[ing] the distant observer which I found myself doing."

Rapport Building. One key learning was "growing the rapport" with immigrant newcomer communities, particularly what camping meant. "They just shared with me that the last time they saw camping equipment piled up like this was when they were fleeing the Burmese army," enhancing the global literacy of the parks staff. Another noted "I started to listen to more what they were saying, to what they wanted to learn, rather than me…let[ting] a million words ramble out." In an unplanned way, the learning occurred as newcomers were able to make connections from their country of origin to Canada, scaffolding their learning from the existing knowledge base. The Burmese later explained that they did not have parks back home and that here "they were really aware of rules…that there's sort of a formal presence in this natural area…[but] they all like it and…think it is for a good cause, that they get it, that you are protecting for us to come and enjoy." In the end, it was the spontaneous activities that were the most meaningful and memorable – sharing cultural songs and stories around the campfire, making banana boats together, impromptu soccer games, frog hunting and butterfly chasing. All the parks staff talked about "bonding" with the participants, leading to ongoing friendships.

Becoming Allies. Not only did the parks staff eventually become allies, by shifting some standard park practices for newcomers, but in retrospect, they were able to see their own learning process and advocate for changed educational practices to benefit newcomer groups. By the last cohort, the parks leader could identify issues with their presentations, "What the Rangers said would have been called inappropriate. It was very thick language, it was very fast." He named the need to make connections with the ESL teachers, ie. "make sure you mention Aspen and trees because that is what they did in the classes." They began to see their program through the

eyes and experiences of newcomers and to name their organizational learning needs. Many friendships were created among the children and adults that lasted beyond this project, illustrating the profound potential of this program for social integration and language growth.

Analysis and Significance

As Taylor found (2006), when learning activities are offered in public, informal locations such as parks and museums in free flow situations, the adult educator typically takes the role of "purveyor of knowledge" (p. 301) . While the activities may be fun, relaxed, engaging and hands-on, they are often still undertaken within a transmission model of teaching. These adult educators could shift to a relationship-building or a knowledge construction role, with the integration of adult education principles and cross-cultural education that problematizes ethnocentric assumptions and white privilege.

Throughout the process, "nature" became a commodity of exchange where parks staff wanted to "give them a true camping experience" and "the red carpet treatment" in exchange for park stewardship. While hospitable on the surface, it constitutes a universalizing of Western constructs of nature, leisure, and camping with assimilation expectations. Such a helping model establishes a power relationship of obligations, rather than mutuality. "Nature" was also objectified as "protected" with a host of regulations of what to touch and where to walk, with liability as the backdrop. Rules were challenged when children climbed trees and limbs were broken for fires, highlighting a contradiction in environmental education which advocates free play and direct engagement in the natural world. In terms of the camping experience, participants found themselves *guests* in a foreign place, parallel to their experience of immigrating to Canada, providing clues to what was important in the "settlement" process. Newcomers enjoyed doing "what Canadians did" but also the freedom to enact their own ideas of recreation, a delicate balance-finding that characterizes the settlement process. The learning process of the parks staff demonstrates clearly the dialectical processes of transformative learning when conflicting interpretations clash, prompting a rethinking of assumptions. Informal learning provided the most important relational link in a constant dance of responsiveness between the parks staff, ESL teachers, and newcomers. In sum, parks staff can be important allies for newcomers, enhancing a sense of place and social belonging and catalyzing vital organizational learning.

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